Ruling Isn't End of Fight, Term Limits Backers Vow

Senate Defeat Likely, but Some See Issue for '96

By Kenneth J. Cooper
and Helen Dewar
Washington Post Staff Writers

Supporters of congressional term limits vowed yesterday to fight for a constitutional amendment in the Senate and to increase their numbers in next year's elections, but opponents predicted that the populist movement would falter.

Term limits advocates conceded that a Senate vote was not likely to succeed, just as a constitutional amendment failed to get a two-thirds majority in the House in March. Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) said that a term limits vote would come "in the months ahead," without specifying exactly.

Sen. Dan Coats (R-Ind.), a leading term limits supporter, reflected the prevailing assessment about the outcome in the Senate when he said, "I don't think there's any way of getting a two-thirds vote."

Even a losing vote would give term limits supporters what they already have for the House—a clear accounting of where lawmakers stand. Republican lawmakers, who are more likely to support term limits, said they would try to use the issue to elect more Republicans.

"Today's ruling makes it more important for people who favor term limits to increase the size of our new Republican majorities next November," said House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.).

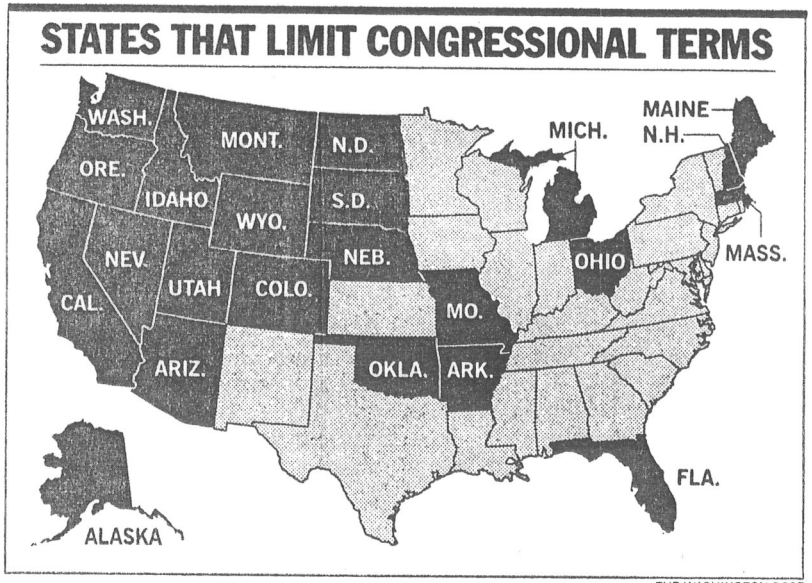
Armey and other House Republicans suggested that the Supreme Court ruling and the promise of Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) to make term limits the first vote of a GOP-controlled House in the next Congress would unify a fractious movement that has been divided over tactics and over whether the limits should be 6, 8 or 12 years.

Sen. Hank Brown (R-Colo.) said he planned to introduce a bill redefining the requirement that a member of Congress be an "inhabitant" of a state to exclude anyone who lived outside the state for 180 days in 12 consecutive years—which virtually defines a long-standing member of Congress. Other term limits supporters doubted that such a redefinition would pass Supreme Court scrutiny.

Rep. Bob Inglis (R-S.C.), another term limits leader, said that the ruling "helps us to work to build momentum for the first revote of the next Congress. . . . It makes it a much bigger issue in the '96 elections."

Rep. Bill McCollum (R-Fla.), whose proposed amendment for 12-year limits failed in the House by 227 to 204, estimated that the chances of picking up enough House seats to reach 290 in favor are better than 50-50. "I think we'll have a very good shot at picking up 60 votes," he said.

Rep. Van Hilleary (R-Tenn.) pointed to Rep. Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.) as an example of a lawmaker who changed his mind on term limits in the face of political pressure back home. Inglis cited term limits opponents who were narrowly elected as likely political targets; others mentioned opponents in the 23 states that have approved term limits.



But Democratic opponents declared the term limits movement dead, the victim of Republican success in the 1994 congressional elections and the broad Supreme Court ruling.

Former House speaker Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.), whose opposition to term limits played a role in his defeat in 1994, called a news conference in his Washington law office to answer questions about his vindication in the Supreme Court. "My belief is that term limits is dead," Foley said.

Term limits were not mentioned once when Foley's successor, Rep. George R. Nethercutt (R-Wash.), attended an April town meeting in Spokane with members of Ross Perot's United We Stand America. Freshman Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.) said he too has seen a "waning interest" in the issue.

Rep. Martin Frost (Tex.), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said the recent elections have shown voters they do not need term limits to change the makeup of Congress.

"I think in '96 there will be much more significant issues the election will turn on," Frost said.

Term limits advocates sharply disagreed.

"I think it will energize the grass roots," said Russell Verney of United We Stand America. "This decision will energize more people to recognize that democracy is not a spectator sport, that it requires their participation."

"This is a movement that has never been the darling of the media or the political elite," said Paul Jacob, director of U.S. Term Limits.

Cleta Mitchell, director of the Term Limits Legal Institute, said a constitutional amendment has long been the goal of term limits advocates and that yesterday's court decision was not a decisive setback.

"This issue has taken on a life of its own," she said. "This is not a sprint, it's a marathon."

Staff writer Dan Balz contributed to this report.